

Catholic Schools and Preferential Option for the Poor

By

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This short article examines the role of teachers in the contemporary Catholic school in exercising the preferential option for the poor. This preferential option for the poor is integral to the teaching of Jesus (especially in Luke's gospel) and the Church and has arguably gained increased importance as the levels of child poverty rise in the UK.

Luke's gospel is often referred to as the gospel of the poor: Jesus demonstrates great concern for the poor throughout the gospel. A good example can be found in the Magnificat (*...and exalted those of low degree; He has filled the hungry with good things*, 1:52-53). Further examples can be found in the Sermon on the Plain (*Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of god. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied*, 6:20-21) and in the Parable of Lazarus and the rich man (16:19-31). This major theme can be discerned at an early stage in his first teaching. After the infancy narratives, his baptism, the temptations in the desert and some teaching in synagogues in Galilee, Jesus arrives home in Nazareth (4:16-30). He enters the synagogue on the Sabbath and is asked to read the scriptures. He is then allowed to speak, to comment on the scriptures. This reading in public and his comments are the first words of his teaching articulated in Luke's gospel and provide an overview of his teaching and mission. He reads from the prophet Isaiah (a conflation of various verses):

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me; he has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and sight for the blind, to send the downtrodden away relieved, and to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.

Once he has finished reading he states that: *this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*. The time had come for the scripture reading to begin to be fulfilled.

Many of the Catholic schools that were established in the UK, before the introduction of mass compulsory state funded school education, were founded with a mission to serve and educate the poor. Religious orders and congregations such as the Marist Brothers, De la Salle Brothers, Sisters of Mercy, Notre Dame sisters and the Daughters of Charity have historically made significant and substantial contributions to this education of the poor. This importance of the mission to the poor was re-articulated in 1965 in the Vatican document, *Gravissimum Educationis*, which draws on this history and interprets this mission for the new era of the late twentieth century to the twenty-first century:

The Sacred Council of the Church earnestly entreat pastors and all the faithful to spare no sacrifice in helping Catholic schools fulfill their function in a continually more perfect way, and especially in caring for the needs of those who are poor in the goods of this world or who are deprived of the assistance and affection of a family or who are strangers to the gift of faith.

This has been configured by Gerald Grace (2002), using contemporary theological language that has been adopted from The Medellin conference of the Latin American Bishops of 1968, as the 'preferential option for the poor' of Catholic schools. This preferential option for the poor is integral to the Catholic commitment to follow Christ. The enactment of this preferential option recognizes the inherent dignity of each person as made in the image of God and highlights solidarity with others, an acknowledgement of the interdependence of people. Those who work in contemporary Catholic schools will recognize this history of the mission to the poor,

the continuing legacy of this history and the increased urgency of exercising the preferential option for the poor. Additionally, there have been multi dimensional, interpretations of the meaning of the word 'poor', ranging from the materially poor, the culturally poor, the emotional poor and the marginalised to the spiritually poor.

Various international initiatives have been launched to tackle the challenge of child poverty such as the *Millennium Development Goals* (2000) and the *Sustainable Development Goals* (2015). Nevertheless, the contemporary levels of material child poverty and deprivation across the UK can only be described as alarming and there are indications that they are increasing. Children are dependents and their poverty reflects the poverty of their families - families on low incomes. Despite assumptions that most of these families are on benefits, a large and growing number of families (around 63%) are in working poverty where at least one adult is in low paid employment. In Northern Ireland the level of child poverty has risen from 23% to 25%. The level in Scotland is around 22%, and in England and Wales around 23%. Material poverty and deprivation experienced by children will often lead to cultural poverty and possibly emotional poverty as families struggle to negotiate the vicissitudes of surviving on a low income. Perhaps one very striking and significant development is the marked increase in the number of children who are being fed on a daily basis with food obtained from food banks. Further, the Red Cross has recently begun collecting and distributing food in Britain for the first time since the Second World War. In Scotland the largest teaching union, the EIS, has recently published guidelines for teachers to help them understand and cope with the impact of poverty and deprivation on children in daily life in school.

Every day, Catholic teachers face the challenges of teaching children who suffer from the effects of material poverty and deprivation. While some local areas and some schools may reject the stigma of being classified as an area of poverty and deprivation, we cannot ignore the impact on the children who are the future of society and our Church. This contemporary context does not mean that Catholic teachers must adopt a quasi-social worker role, but does expand the concept of duty of care, and in Catholic school, the concept of duty of Christian care. Catholic teachers in their daily interaction with the children are called not just to the Christian preferential option for the poor but to Christian solidarity with the poor. When we take into account the multi dimensionality of poverty as outlined above, this duty of Christian care and solidarity is extended to the culturally poor, the emotional poor, the marginalized and the spiritually poor. Catholic school leaders and teachers do, of course, have extensive experience of working with these different dimensions of poverty but this has to be more widely recognized and supported, especially in this period of increased poverty. Where the child has no contact with a local parish, for whatever reason, it is the staff of the Catholic school who are the daily witnesses to Christ and Christian values and principles such as preferential option for the poor and solidarity.

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